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BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Colbert's West India Policy. By STEWART L. MIMS. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912. 8vo, pp. xvi+385. \$2.00.

As the student grows older and presumably wiser, he realizes ever more keenly that the essential point in all investigations is the ascertainment of the exact facts, and that, when once this almost insuperable obstacle is overcome, the balance of the journey is easy travelling. Even in this day of comparatively full publicity, most of the controversies about current social and political questions in large part resolve themselves into disagreements as to fundamental facts. Although the quantitative study of economic phenomena is still in a rudimentary stage of development and although 'we may have to wait a century or two before the science and art of statistics can be so far perfected as to give accurate and trustworthy results,' yet the student of contemporary questions is infinitely better off than is the historian relying upon the scant and often misleading records of the past. This handicap increases directly with the remoteness of the period investigated. The dearth of reliable material for even relatively recent times can scarcely be realized. For instance—and this is typical, rather than exceptional—there are available only the most meagre statistics about England's foreign trade prior to the eighteenth century. It is largely for this reason that so many works on economic history are unsatisfactory and unconvincing. They rest upon no solid basis of fact and rarely give the desired information with that essential precision of detail without which the course of development cannot be understood. Among the few welcome exceptions to this general rule—such as W. R. Scott's *Joint-Stock Companies to 1720* and Georges Scelle's *La Traite Négrière aux Indes de Castille*—must be placed this valuable work of Professor Mims on *Colbert's West India Policy*.

The underlying principles of the old colonial system of Bourbon France are clearly defined and readily ascertainable, "Dans l'établissement des différentes compagnies des îles, le gouvernement et les intéressés dans ces compagnies ne s'étoient proposé que le commerce," wrote Émilien Petit in 1771 in his *Droit Public ou Gouvernement des Colonies Françaises*, of which Professor Girault edited a reprint in 1911. As in the case of the old British Empire before the industrial revolution had

altered its character, French colonization was an integral and subordinate part of the larger movement of commercial expansion, and the colonies were encouraged and protected with the distinct and avowed purpose of adding to the economic resources of the mother kingdom. This fact has never been more explicitly stated than in the able memorial which was communicated in 1765 to the Bureau du Commerce—the French body very roughly corresponding to its British contemporary, the Board of Trade and Plantations. Herein it was pointed out “que les colonies n’ont été fondées que pour l’utilité de la métropole, qu’elles ont été formées à ses dépens et par ses soins, qu’elles sont protégées par ses armes, que destinées uniquement à porter le commerce de la nation au delà de ses bornes premières et naturelles, leur culture n’est protégée et encouragée qu’en faveur de ce même commerce; qu’il doit donc agir dans les colonies, sans concurrence avec l’étranger; que tout acte de commerce au dehors est, dans les colonies le plus monstrueux des désordres, parce qu’il attaque plus directement la destination de l’établissement; que cet acte serait un véritable vol fait à la métropole; qu’il n’est point de nation assez insensée pour former et conserver à grands frais des colonies qui n’existeraient cependant que pour l’utilité des nations étrangères et pour la leur propre, tandis que la métropole serait ainsi ruinée par la prospérité même de ses colonies.”

These general principles were first systematically applied to the French West Indies by Colbert and they were maintained in force by his successors. They constituted the essence of French colonial policy; and, although their general purport has been well understood, no one has hitherto attempted a methodical study of their application and of the development of the French Empire under them. Whatever has been written is either fragmentary or inaccurate, and bears striking witness to the truth of Gustave Le Bon’s recent remark that there is no phase of history “dont on puisse dire qu’elle soit sûrement connue.” This strange neglect of the French school of historians, as a rule so alert and enthusiastic, is now being remedied by Professor Mims, who plans an exhaustive study of French colonial policy. The book before us describes events only down to 1683, but the promised subsequent instalments, presumably in at least three more volumes, will cover the eighteenth century. In preparing for this important work, Professor Mims spent considerable time in Paris working through the mass of manuscript records in the various repositories of that city, the Archives Nationales, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Archives des Affaires Etrangères, and those of the Ministère des Colonies. In addition, some information was

derived from the departmental archives. In the main, these various and voluminous records have hitherto remained unused for this purpose, so that the information imparted by this book is not only first hand, but also to a great extent completely new.

After two introductory chapters giving a useful account of the beginnings of French colonization in the Antilles, we reach Colbert's ministry and the formation of the West India Company in 1664. The rest of the work is devoted to an intensive study of the two following decades, in which were first systematically applied to the French Empire those principles of regulating colonial trade which England was contemporaneously elaborating. Without a full knowledge of the basic sources, such as Professor Mims is unique in possessing, it is obviously impossible for the critic to render a dogmatic judgment, but everything points to a careful, scientific, and scrupulously honest use of the raw material. There are evident some faint traces of a tendency to give undue weight to colonial complaints, but in general the spirit is one of strict objectivity. The facts are presented as they were found without any subjective twist. We trust, however, that in his future instalments, Professor Mims will somewhat broaden the scope of his investigations and will take into consideration those factors in the economic life of France and in that of the colonies without which it is impossible to understand the results of French policy. For instance, in discussing the effect of the French tobacco monopoly on the cultivation of that plant in St. Domingo, no mention is made of the increasingly large quantity of tobacco grown in France itself. The English documents frequently refer to this fact, which in all probability was more influential than the government monopoly in rendering the cultivation of tobacco in the West Indies unprofitable. Similarly, it is impossible to follow the development of the French sugar trade in competition with that of the English islands, unless some precise account is given of the system of local taxation in force in the French West Indies. Leroy-Beaulieu has seemingly over-estimated the importance of this factor, but it certainly deserves some consideration. It is fully appreciated that this suggested extension of Professor Mims's investigations will greatly add to his difficulties, but we feel confident of his ability to overcome them. But, even as it is, one cannot but give a hearty welcome to a book so well documented and satisfying as is this; and the subsequent instalments will be impatiently awaited by all interested in the history of eighteenth-century America.

GEORGE LOUIS BEER

NEW YORK CITY